

# **A preliminary survey of university art museums in Southeast Asia**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents a preliminary survey of the university museums landscape in Southeast Asia, some of the challenges confronting each of these institutions, and the different curatorial strategies employed in relation to specific needs of each university museum. These issues have not been well documented or discussed. Recent efforts by a group of university museums in Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia to initiate a regional platform where discussions and practices can be exchanged will be discussed in this article. Considering the dramatic growth of museums and their exhibitions in Asia, this initiative acknowledges the need for a network that encourages innovative and sustainable strategies in mobilizing university museum collections and curatorial collaborations.*

## **Introduction**

This paper presents a preliminary survey of the university museum landscape in Southeast Asia, outlines the varying histories pertaining to the origins and development of selected museums, identifies some of the challenges confronting each of these institutions and considers the different curatorial strategies employed in relation to specific needs of each university museum. These issues have hitherto not received much attention nor drawn much discussion in the absence of a regional collaborative platform. The impetus for a regional university museums platform first emerged during an exhibition collaboration between the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum and the Vargas Museum at the University of the Philippines (see below). This led to a conference organized jointly by Vargas Museum and NUS Museum, which was hosted by the former at the University of Philippines, Manila in January 2010.

The 2-day conference titled *Challenges Confronting University Museum Collections and Contemporary Curatorial Practice in Southeast Asia* was a preliminary attempt at mapping the university museums landscape in Southeast Asia, defining the role of university museums, highlighting challenges faced by participating institutions, setting the agenda for future engagements, identifying collaborative strategies that are tailored to fit individual and collective needs, and are, more crucially, based on sustainable and meaningful forms of collaboration and exchange.

Cognizant of the diverse spectrum and histories of university museums in the region, this conference was not designed to compile an exhaustive list of university museums. Participation at this preliminary juncture involved selected representatives from university museums in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. The current (though evolving) focus of the regional network is limited to museums specializing in modern and contemporary art, for example NUS Museum, National University of Singapore (art museum), Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia (science and art museum), and, in the Philippines, Vargas Museum, University of the Philippines (art museum), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (design & art museum which is a space for students to exhibit their works), De La Salle University (art museum), Ateneo Art Gallery at the Ateneo de Manila University (art museum).

## **Challenges confronting university museums in Southeast Asia**

The issues highlighted and discussed during the Manila conference are the ones pertinent to university museums regionally and internationally. Regardless of functioning within wide-ranging realities and contexts, many university museums grapple with physical and funding constraints whilst constantly working to align and strategically position itself in relation to the university and its aims

(some institutions, in contrast, are only tenuously linked to the university's formal structure). Underscoring the diversity of university museums, some institutions outlined curatorial directions that are consciously integrated into the university's academic programs, and at times, corporate strategies. Others highlighted connections with communities outside the university, on national or international levels, at times threading precariously the dynamics of the art market.

### **Mapping the university museums landscape in Southeast Asia**

The examples below illustrate the university museums landscape in Southeast Asia as well as some of the issues identified in the preceding section.

#### *The University of Philippines (UP) Vargas Museum*

The Vargas Museum collection is a bequest from the Philippines' first Executive Secretary Jorge Vargas who left his collection of art, personal papers and memorabilia to his alma mater in 1978. In 1986, the Vargas Museum was built. Its art collection shows the extensive range of Philippine artistic activity. It also has a philatelic and numismatic collection, both of which span the 1880s to the 1960s/1970s. It has more artworks by the country's first national artist, Fernando Amosolo than any other public collection. In addition, the museum has a collection of rare Filipiniana documents, papers, books, journals, newspapers and magazines from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At present, the museum is managed by the office of the Chancellor together with other museum collections owned by the University of Philippines. Each is regarded as a separate entity. The 2010 conference in Manila was funded by the university with a view of coordinating and gathering all the various museums on campus under the direction of a university curator, thereby promoting a more coherent vision and interaction.

#### *Galeri Soemardja, Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB)*

Galeri Soemardja in Indonesia is the oldest university gallery in Indonesia and Bandung, but it has no collection. It was founded, though not funded, by the university as a university gallery in 1974. It functions as a commercial gallery space. The gallery is named after the late Syafe'i Soemardja, one of the architects of art education system in Indonesia. Functioning as an educational complement to the university's department of fine art, Galeri Soemardja was initially a place for the academic circles of ITB to exhibit their works. Currently, it is a place for contemporary art exhibitions; the curatorial strategy is largely organic in function and positioning: students, young emerging artists, and curators are invited to participate in projects relating to exhibition and art programs.

#### *Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)*

Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah is amongst the earliest entities of its kind to be established in a Malaysian university. It combines both sciences and arts under one roof. The conceptual premise of the Muzium & Galeri Tuanku USM is the emphasis on the promotion of a balanced symbiosis between heritage, modern and contemporary art, history of science and technology and the challenges of securing a sustainable development for the future. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah USM is also known in Malaysia for its significant collection of modern art. This collection is balanced by contemporary art exhibitions and interactive science and technology exhibitions. Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah USM also features a collection of various cultural artifacts especially those related to the traditional forms of the performing arts such as *Mak Yong*, *Gamelan* and *Wayang Kulit*. This collection is kept alive through various interactive activities in the form of workshops, demonstrations, performances, short courses and lectures.

### *NUS Museum, National University of Singapore (NUS)*

The history of NUS Museum can be traced back to the establishment in 1955 of the University of Malaya Art Museum at the then University of Malaya (currently the National University of Singapore). It may be regarded as a prototypical museum institution, its historical trajectory and collection reflecting the search for a Malayan identity within the geographical and cultural contexts of Southeast Asia, China and India. Started under the direction of Michael Sullivan, an art historian and the museum's first curator from 1954 to 1960, the museum's collection was instrumental in the teaching and study of art history at the university. The collection was also very much a colonial inheritance, shaped by the politics of decolonization and emergence of the nation. Following the split of Singapore and Malaya and the former's independence in 1965, the museum's collection was divided, half of which went to the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. With the closure of the museum in 1973, the collection was moved to the National Museum until 2002 when the NUS Museum was officially opened. Today, with its collection ranging from classical Chinese and Indian materials to modern and contemporary Southeast Asia art, the museum seeks to remain an integral part of the university. The museum's curatorial emphasis is on bridging the contemporary and historical, with a focus on Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. Exhibitions are conceived to complement and dialogue with the museum's permanent collection, encouraging emerging perspectives relating to art, heritage and culture. Programs and projects are also developed to provide platforms that encourage collaboration between researchers, students, artists and curators.

### **Collaborations – agenda for future engagements**

Following the initial agenda tabled during the Manila conference in January 2010, a follow-up conference was convened and organized in December 2010 by the Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah in Penang, Malaysia. At this session, the regional grouping and network of university museums was formalized as the University Museums Network Southeast Asia (UMNet).

The regional network will serve as a platform and tool to facilitate discourse and knowledge on the functions and status of university museums. The link between the university and museum affords the university museum space to negotiate a distinct position where it becomes a “site of theoretical exploration and experimentation in its own right, where the dominance of verbal mediation, which characterizes the academy, gives way to a primacy of spatial and sensorial modes of narration and signification” (REIMAN). The network also aims to raise the profile of university museums within and beyond hosting universities, engage with existing regional (ASEAN) and international networks (UMAC), develop common tools of engagement such as publications, conferences, curatorial residencies and workshops, develop sustainable and meaningful strategies in mobilizing collections and curatorial interests.

The emphasis on the process of collaboration amongst our university museums is regarded as a process hinging on the desire to establish curatorial strategies sensitive to and contingent upon the particularities of each university museum's history and current position.

### **A case study: Persistent Visions | Erika Tan**

This paper concludes with a case study, *Persistent Visions | Erika Tan*, which prompted the initiation of a regional network of university museums in Southeast Asia. One of its aims is to continue collaborations, more specifically, exhibitions drawing reference and adapting from a collaborative framework developed during the conceptualization in 2009 of the *Persistent Visions* was developed by NUS Museum (Singapore) and Vargas Museum (Philippines) in 2009. Erika Tan is a Singapore born, London-based artist. Her 24-minute, three-screen video installation explored the concept of the colonial archive as a site of contestation and power. Presented concurrently in both museum spaces

and contextualized using a selection of each university museum's collection and curatorial interpretation (see fig. 1–6), the project encapsulates a lean, inexpensive, and fluid mode of collaboration that the regional network (UMNet) seeks to continue in the course of its development.



Fig. 1–3 - *Persistent Visions* was presented at the NUS Museum's Archival Square flanked by the Chinese collection of bronzes and ceramics and archaeological materials from Singapore's Fort Canning. This curatorial strategy prompted intimations towards the 'museum' as an emporium of classifications and taxonomies shaped by varied intents. Gallery impression, *Persistent Visions* | Erika Tan, NUS Museum, 2009. Photos courtesy of NUS Museum, National University of Singapore



Fig. 4 - Materials from the UP Vargas Museum extend the discourse in Erika Tan's work to the Philippine colonial experience. Two paintings from the art collection respond to the colonizer's gaze towards the colonized. Here in this image: *Picnic in Normandy* by Juan Luna, a Filipino painter trained in the Western academic tradition. Gallery impression, *Persistent Visions* | Erika Tan, UP Vargas Museum, 2009. Photo courtesy of Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines, Diliman



Fig. 5 - *Day Begins* by Vicente Alvarez Dizon, an artist who received further training in American institutions. Gallery impression, *Persistent Visions* | Erika Tan, UP Vargas Museum, 2009. Photo courtesy of Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines, Diliman



Fig. 6 - Various images of the American colonial presence in the Philippines as documented in photographs offer a glimpse of how the Americans, as a colonial power, represent themselves through their own gaze to reinforce the idea of the white man's burden. Published in the book *Our Islands and their People as Seen with Camera and Pencil* by Jose de Olivares (Saint Louis: N. D. Thompson Publishing, 1899), these images serve as vivid journals of the West's encounter with the Orient. Gallery impression, *Persistent Visions* | Erika Tan, UP Vargas Museum, 2009. Photo courtesy of Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines, Diliman

### Literature cited

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